"A Positive Failure": Holy Foolishness, Paradox, and Narrative in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in English at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2018

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"A higher paradox confounds emotion as well as reason and there are long periods in the lives of all of us… when truth as revealed by faith is hideous, emotionally disturbing, downright repulsive." - Flannery O'Connor

The Idiot is often regarded by readers and critics as the most bizarre and difficult of Fyodor Dostoevsky's major novels. Its complex and uneven narrative lacks structural solidity and thematic continuity, while its main character's personality degenerates from that of a selfless and spiritually idealistic figure, ready to sacrifice himself to end the suffering of others, into a morally incompetent idiot unable to save anyone including himself. The paradoxical and seemingly unredemptive ending of *The Idiot* informs the reception of the novel as a failure; in my thesis I will argue that the novel's perceived failure and weaknesses serve a problematic *ad hoc* ending that engages its readers in an interpretative exercise to consider the compatibility of spirituality and the competing secular egoisms of 19th century Russian society.

The popular reception of *The Idiot* as a failure hinges on the fact that Dostoevsky's stated ambition for the novel was to portray a "positively beautiful man" (Lowe 17), which he feared would be a "positive failure," along with the seemingly incompatible climax scene that leaves Prince Myshkin, Rogozhin, and Nastasya Filippovna, the three main characters of the novel, respectively, in a state of idiocy, mad with brain fever, and murdered. By all appearances this unredemptive ending conflicts with Dostoevsky's desire to portray a "positively beautiful man" and serves to complicate the responses to the novel by questioning whether Myshkin's perceived failure (manifested in his inability to change society, to save Nastasya's life, and himself from idiocy) was a failure of Dostoevsky's artistry, or, as I will argue, an intentional failure designed

to confront the reader with, what Harriet Murav in her work *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky's Novels & the Poetics of Cultural Critique* calls, "a deliberate narrative strategy" (75). Such a strategy, she argues, sought to enact a reevaluation of societal values and attitudes that was, in 19th century Russia, progressively leaving traditional Orthodox religious and spiritual conceptions of morality behind. William J. Leatherbarrow, in the introduction to Alan Myer's translation of *The Idiot*, writes that rather than being a failure of a novel "it could also be argued (and this is a far more intriguing possibility) that… this was to be a novel about failure" (vii). Central to this idea of failure is the figure of the holy fool.

The Idiot's titular character Prince Myshkin begins the novel described by Dostoevsky as a "positively beautiful man" or, as referred to in his notebooks for the novel, a holy fool (*iurodivy*). The holy fool, by definition, is a paradox; culturally, the holy fool is a religious figure borrowed from the Russian Orthodox tradition and, as Priscilla Hunt points out in her essay "Holy Foolishness as a Key to Russian Culture," exhibits "a radical mode of sanctity derived from Paul's description in the First Epistle to the Corinthians of what it means to be an 'apostle of Christ,'" that is, as "spectacles" to be abused, but whose "sacrificial humility" is a "protest against the worldly definition of wisdom that discounts their actions as foolishness" (2). The holy fool simultaneously provokes a response while critiquing the dismissiveness of those who seek to define and delimit unique religious identities like holy foolishness. This dynamic comes into play later with the way in which Myshkin is interpreted and, often, pathologized by the other characters of the novel. This speaks to the larger issue of the importance of what is yielded when interpreting the holy fool.

The holy fool poses what Hunt calls an inherent "interpretative challenge" (1). By emphasizing his or her humility, the holy fool seeks to "expose pride and hypocrisy in the same way as Paul's irony and sarcasm shames his addressees: 'We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored!' (1 Cor. 4-10)" (Hunt 2). The irony that permeates Paul's epistle also characterizes the holy fool whose very being is meant to confront his audience with its multiple layers of paradoxical meaning. The holy fool, modeled after Christ's own self-abnegating homelessness, often assumes the guise of madness and acts with exaggerated self-abnegation (such as dressing in rags or consorting with prostitutes) in order to prompt contempt and abuse, thus exposing the malice and pride of those who seek to judge them, just as Christ went reviled and unrecognized. The response to the holy fool, whether one of derision or reverence, often defines the limits of a person's own faith. In the same way as in *The Idiot*, Myshkin acts as a touchstone in that others are defined by the way they respond to him with varying degrees of amusement, admiration, and loathing.

Prince Myshkin enters the novel penniless, an outsider, and innocent to the goings-on of a morally and spiritually depleted society. His designation as a "prince" (kniaz) allies him with an earlier tradition of Russian nobility that was governed by Orthodox religious customs and traditions. At the time *The Idiot* takes place, "prince" is an obsolete honorific and often used either ironically or nostalgically. The novel opens (and ends) with Prince Myshkin and his diabolical double, Rogozhin. Where Myshkin is open-hearted, naive, tall, and frail, Rogozhin is distrustful, malignant, short, and "out of harmony" (5). They meet for the first time on a train heading from Europe to St. Petersburg. Myshkin is returning home after a period of more than

four years in a Swiss asylum on account of his illness, "some strange nervous illness like the falling sickness or St. Vitus's dance, some sort of trembling and convulsions" (6), that is, epilepsy. As a result of Myshkin's long absence and confinement he has remained child-like and idealistic. His whole person suggests what he represents and he acts with unconventional meekness and honesty; he is even dressed unsuitably for the bitter Russian winter, in a light coat and improper shoes, which is characteristic of the holy fool. Rogozhin is also returning after having inherited over a million rubles from his recently deceased and miserly father in order to obsessively court the "ruined" and beautiful Nastasya Filippovna. They take an inexplicable liking to one another almost immediately and their meeting sets in motion the dual tensions at play in the novel, that is, the complete absence of vanity and egoism in the holy foolishness of Myshkin, and the possessive and infectious impulses of Rogozhin's material motivations.

The significance of this first scene begins the main exploration in Dostoevsky's novel of what a society consumed by an ethic of self-interest and greed will wreak on a positively good person. It's not quite a clean dichotomy, but from the embodied descriptions of both Myshkin and Rogozhin, it is clear that Myshkin represents something like moral openheartedness and goodness, while Rogozhin represents the nihilistic pull of Russia's modern condition. Throughout the entire novel Myshkin is repeatedly referred to as an idiot, but significantly, only once as a holy fool, and by Rogozhin, the character most blinded by his egoisms. Within minutes of their meeting Rogozhin accosts Myshkin:

> "And are you a great fancier of the female sex, Prince? Tell me beforehand!"
>
> "N-n-no! I'm… Maybe you don't know, but because of my inborn illness, I don't know women at all."

> "Well, in that case," Rogozhin exclaimed, "you come out as a holy fool, Prince, and God loves your kind!" (15)

The amusement Rogozhin displays at Myshkin's complete naivety reveals the values of Russian society and sets the stage for many of the responses other characters will have to the naive and gauche qualities Myshkin exhibits. In her essay "Lice in the Iron Cap" Svitlana Kobets writes, "only sinners laugh at the holy fool's antics, as they see madness where the pious see holiness" (31). By exposing their true intentions, the holy fool confronts the individual with their own lack of faith, while simultaneously providing a model of the Christian convictions of compassion, protest, and humility which entice the holy fool's spectators into an active reexamination of their faith.

After his arrival in Petersburg, Myshkin shortly becomes entangled in the complex and scandalous situations of a society that is altogether unfamiliar and hostile to him. In the first two-hundred pages of the novel (which constitutes a day), he has unceremoniously intruded on multiple familial and private spheres, been slapped for preventing a fight between siblings, and proposed to the "ruined" Nastasya Filipova whom he loves, paradoxically, "not with love, but with pity" (208). Nastasya is a "fallen" woman who was, at a young and vulnerable age, "seduced" (in Dostoevsky's words, but raped is more appropriate) by her guardian after the tragic death of her entire family. After ten years Totsky has grown sick of Nastasya and wishes, at "the prime of his life" (13), that is, at 55, to marry someone respectable and marriageable. In order to rid himself of Nastasya he seeks to sell her off to another man named Ganya. The scandals that ensue constitute some of the most emotionally resonant and compelling writing in all of literature. One example depicts a luminous scene of tragic agency in which Nastasya

Filippovna denies Myshkin's unexpected marriage proposal and flings a bundle of 70,000 roubles, money serving essentially to buy her, into the fireplace. In an attempt to simultaneously punish herself and avenge her rape she leaves the scene intending to further degrade herself by becoming Rogozhin's mistress (whose money she throws in the fire to express her disgust with Totsky, Ganya, and Rogozhin's bargaining for her). Myshkin's unceasing desire to save, or even redeem Nastasya becomes his hamartia in *The Idiot*, and leads to his eventual downfall. This depiction of Myshkin and his sacrificial and indecorous behavior is intended to challenge both the novel's characters and readers with an ideal of provocative goodness within the context of a Russia pervaded by self-interest and materialism. The first part of the novel ends on this note of scandal with Nastasya having destroyed her already tenuous reputation by running away with Rogozhin and refusing Myshkin's proposal, despite being deeply moved by his genuine and non-exploitative motives, because she does not want to "disgrace and ruin him" (215) as she was disgraced and ruined by a society she despises and renounces for its hypocrisy. These events that conclude the first part of *The Idiot* depict the dominant view of society as a repository of corruption, one that, though affected by the appearance of Myshkin's holy foolishness, also dismisses and abuses him for the ideal he represents.

A temporal gap of six months in which Myshkin is inaccessible to the reader spans part one and part two, allowing rumor and speculation to dominate the next three parts of the novel in order to leave possibilities and plot-lines open and indeterminate. Presumably, Myshkin is pursuing Nastaya, but nothing is certain. The omniscient narrator, at the beginning of part two, even admits "we can supply very little information" (179) about Myshkin and his disputed whereabouts during these six months, and goes on to state that "even those who had certain

reasons to be interested in his fate could find out very little about him during all that time. True, some sort of rumors reach some of them, though very rarely, but these were mostly strange and almost always contradicted each other." The effect of such gaps and inconsistencies renders the authority and reliability of the omniscient narrator questionable. Rhetorical paradox is a powerful tool for Dostoevsky to produce uncertainty and encourage a reflection that the holy fool seeks to establish. "True," the narrator goes on, seemingly amused, "tales were told of some little fool of a prince (no one could name him for certain), who had suddenly inherited an enormous fortune and married some traveling Frenchwoman, a famous cancan dancer or other" (180). It's left up to the reader to decide what has and has not occurred as Myshkin becomes more and more withdrawn from the narrative and difficult to define. One of the novel's "anti-heroes" Ippolit (a young and tubercular nihilist) remarks, "[Myshkin] is either a doctor or indeed of an extraordinary intelligence and able to guess a great many things. (But that he is ultimately an 'idiot' there can be no doubt at all.)" (389). The growing paradoxical ambiguity of Myshkin's identity, in spite of the certainty of his idiocy, is in stark contrast to earlier assertions from the novel's characters of Myshkin's openness and clarity.

Given that the purpose of the holy fool is to highlight the competing tensions of the secular world by offering a dialectical relationship that is both satiric and salvific, its function is central to the narrative of *The Idiot* which, beginning in part two, is peppered with subplots and minor characters that compete for attention with Myshkin's narrative hold. These narrative deviations have been perceived by critics as defects, but are, paradoxically, the conflicting threads that hold the narrative together. This speaks to the performative sphere of the holy fool whose eccentric behavior and strange appearance is inherently performative, both parodic and

combative, but also historically suggests a spiritual insight that challenges dominant, societal norms, and was, for Dostoevsky, a "site of resistance" (Murav 8) against the secularist influence of 19th century Russia.

Throughout the novel nearly all of Myshkin's encounters with others and with society turn toward the scandalous and parodic, but a deeper and more spiritual meaning lies beneath each situation. During a fraught reunion with the suspicious Rogozhin, in whose house hangs Hans Holbein the Younger's "The Body of the Dead Christ," an image that serves as an anti-icon (the response to which, like the holy fool, many of the novel's characters gauge their faith), Myshkin exclaims after seeing the grotesquely realistic painting, "A man could even lose his faith from that painting!" (218). The exchange goes on,

> "Lose it he goes," Rogozhin suddenly agreed unexpectedly...
>
> "What?" the prince suddenly stopped. "How can you! I was almost joking, and you're so serious! And why did you ask me whether I believe in God?"
>
> "Never mind, I just did. I wanted to ask you before. Many people don't believe nowadays…" (219)

Myshkin, upset at Rogozhin's nascent atheism, goes on to tell four separate stories about recent encounters that have informed his faith. One story about a learned atheist whom Myshkin baffles with his religious fervor; and another about a peasant who crosses himself and prays "'Lord, forgive me for Christ's sake!'" before killing his friend for a silver watch, to which Rogozhin gleefully laughs "Now that I like!... The one doesn't believe in God at all, and the other believes so much that he even stabs people with a prayer" (220). However, Myshkin continues to tell two other stories, one about a "drunken soldier" who sells his silver cross (really a modest tin one) to

Myshkin for 20 kopecks and another about a young peasant woman who crosses herself after seeing her infant's first smile, saying to Myshkin, "It's just that a mother rejoices...when she notices her baby's first smile, the same as God rejoices each time he looks down from heaven and sees a sinner standing before him and praying with all his heart" (220-221). This idea strikes the deeply religious Myshkin as "express[ing] the whole essence of Christianity," that is, as he tells Rogozhin "the essence of religious feeling that doesn't fit in with any reasoning, with any crimes and tresspasses, or with any atheisms." The spontaneity of Myshkin's stories have an inexplicable effect on Rogozhin who requests at once to exchange crosses, his gold cross for Myshkin's tin one. This bizarre but moving scene, which actually prefigures Rogozhin's attempted murder of Myshkin, seeks to challenge the idea that humans are rational beings at all and that reason is ever a reliable means of knowing ourselves, others, and God. This idea, central to the unreason of the holy fool, expresses the irrational qualities of faith Myshkin believes will redeem the world.

Myshkin, by part two, by no means fits neatly into the holy fool tradition. Though he still exhibits similar qualities to the holy fool, such as his enduring meekness and faith, he lacks his earlier status as an outsider and is no longer certain of his goals. His disillusionment with society infects his agency and his narrative influence, and he is unable to fully resolve the issue of his identity or others projections of him. Alternatively, Dostoevsky uses the holy fool as a narrative tool to demonstrate the spiritual and ethical poverty of a society that is unable to successfully interpret the paradox the holy fool embodies. Over the course of the novel Dostoevsky intentionally and gradually weakens Myshkin's holy foolish identity as the narrative shifts to rumor and hearsay. By taking over the role of the holy fool, the narrative misleads and leads the

characters and readers into an interpretative exercise of considering Myshkin's shifting identity, as well as his failure and folly. Dostoevsky in the notebooks writes, "The Prince is like a sphinx. Like a sphinx. He reveals himself, without explanations on the part of the author. The main problem: the character of the Idiot. Develop it… Therefore, pointing out gradually the Prince in action will be sufficient" (Wasiolek 248). The growing elusiveness of Myshkin's identity -- whether "Prince" or "Idiot" or "sphinx" -- for both the novel's narrator, characters, and readers signals the difficulty of representing the holy fool after entering a society dominated by atheism and rationalism. Throughout the first part of the novel Myshkin is the focus of the omniscient narrative and appears to nearly dominate the narrator's preoccupation, suggesting an empathy shared with him. However, by the second half of the novel the narrator regards Myshkin with bafflement and some derision. Several times the omniscient narrator professes confusion at Myshkin's actions, "we ourselves, in many cases, have difficulty explaining what happened" (573) and ironically asserts "let us not forget that the reasons for human actions are usually incalculably more complex and diverse than we tend to explain them, and are seldom clearly manifest. Sometimes it is best for the narrator to limit himself to a simple account of events" (484). Because the holy fool was no longer able to function confronted with modernity in which religious certainties had begun to collapse, the qualities of the holy fool shift from figure to narrative in order to better imbue its effect. The jeopardization of a streamlined and coherent plotline has the same effects of the holy fool who enlists the audience in figuring out for themselves what has happened.

One character named Keller, who earlier in the novel attempts to slander Myshkin with a newspaper article that mixes truth and lies, remarks after meeting and getting to know Myshkin,

"Such simple-heartedness, such innocence as even the golden age never heard of, then suddenly at the same time you pierce a man through like an arrow with this deepest psychology of observation" (309). The meek force of Myshkin's strange charisma draws the novel's other characters toward him, and makes them, like Rogozhin's inexplicable attraction to Myshkin in the novel's first pages, "especially eager to make the prince [their] interlocutor" (11); Dostoevsky also simultaneously, through Myshkin's ambiguous character, confronts the reader with disjointed portraits of events and of Myshkin himself. Sarah Young, in her essay "Dostoevskii's The Idiot and the Epistle of James," identifies this tension in the narrative:

> Myshkin in Part One of the novel offers a harmonious alternative of interaction for the sake of the other. However, the lies about him in Keller's article provide an alternative past to the one we have already been given, which undermines the other characters' and the readers' perception of the hero's goodness and capacity to help others. The falsehoods the article contains introduce doubt into Myshkin's mind, damaging his confidence in his mission and his ideas, which threatens his ability to act for the sake of the other. (417)

The uncertainty of the ongoing narrative, produced by the narrator's unreliability, draws attention to the clashing forces of parts one and the other parts of the novel, as well as how these conflicting readings inform and infect Myshkin's identity. The effect of Dostoevsky's purpose in doing this challenges the reader with layers of paradox and multiple possible readings available for interpretation, thus engaging the perceptive faculties that the holy fool provokes.

This weakening of Myshkin's holy fool qualities, that is, his capacity to represent an ideal, result in his ultimate failure to shield anyone from the novel's tragic end. The spiritual and moral decline of Myshkin's efficacy under the pressure of a materialistic and ego-driven world

reveals the practical difficulty in preserving what the holy fool represents, and informs the criticism of not only Myshkin but the novel as a failure. The majority of the criticism surrounding Myshkin, represented here by Dostoevsky scholars Janet Tucker, Sarah Young, Murray Krieger, and Ernest Simmons, deem him as a representation of an "unattainable ideal" (Simmons 204) or as a product of Dostoevsky's failed artistic vision and thus "incompletely realized" (Tucker 23). Myshkin's gauche and self-effacing personality often confronts others with the hypocrisy and egoism of their own actions, but more often than not they do not alter their behavior or attitude and this anticipates the tragedy that awaits the novel's ending and is often diagnosed as the failure of the novel that discounts its strengths. Young writes that the novel "ends in abject failure and a denial of Christ's divinity… which has been called Dostoevskii's most ethical text, but is also his darkest, ending with no image of spiritual redemption or hope" (404-5) and this sentiment comes close to much of the novel's historical reception which views Myshkin as "torn apart" by his inner-contradictions as "half-saint (or half-idiot) and half-man, half out of the world and half committed to it" (Krieger 216). Many critics have even suggested that Dostoevsky should have made the novel into a novella, ending the four-part novel with the outstandingly cohesive first part. However, these critics seem to have forgotten that in 19th century Russia, publishing houses often paid by the page and Dostoevsky was perpetually in need of money. Murav examines this reception of the novel as a failure in her essay "*The Idiot* and the Problem of Recognition" in which the novel's "perceived 'impossibilities,' failures, and 'gaps' are part of a deliberate narrative strategy in which holy foolishness plays a central part" (75). This goes back to Hunt's assertion that the holy fool poses

an "interpretative challenge" (1) to the reader who is actively lured into engaging and interpreting the text and its efficacy.

Thankfully, not all critics regard the novel as a failure due to Myshkin's failure; Edward Wasiolek claims in his introduction to Dostoevsky's notebooks for the novel,

> It is only a hopelessly pragmatic and schematic mind, weighing moral worth by some statistic of help and harm, that would read the tally sheet of results as the measure of Myshkin's worth… If we were to measure Christ by pragmatic results, he too might appear to be an emissary of darkness rather than of light. (77-78)

Wasiolek points to the larger message of Myshkin as a challenge to the "pragmatic and schematic" paradigms in which reason must always abide or triumph. Myshkin seeks to reject the scrutiny of such paradigms by virtue of his paradoxical nature that seeks to reconcile goodness and the mental derangement of epilepsy, as well as his good-intentions and ultimate failure. During one of *The Idiot*'s early scenes, Myshkin is sitting down to eat lunch with his distant relation, Lizaveta Epanchin and her three daughters, whom he has sought out after arriving in St Petersburg. He unceremoniously begins sharing his life story, beginning with the reason he is often considered an idiot, and it is in this scene that Myshkin demonstrates his deeply empathetic and emotional intelligence, as well as his naive and childlike disposition. He tells the story of his admittance to the Swiss asylum where he had spent the four years prior to the beginning of the novel, in which he had, due to his epilepsy, "lapsed into a total stupor… the logical flow of thought was broken. I couldn't put more than two or three ideas together coherently" (56). This stupor mirrors the stupor he will once again enter at the end of the novel after the murder of Nastasya, but Myshkin goes on to state "what roused me [out of the stupor]

was the braying of an ass in the town market… and it was as if everything cleared up in my head." The biblical significance of the braying of an ass sheds significant light on Myshkin's possible sanctity as a holy fool, harkening to Christ humbly riding on a donkey into Jerusalem to deliver His message. This story, and another in which Myshkin offers a startlingly vivid description of the face of a condemned man a moment before being beheaded by a guillotine, bizarrely endear him to Lizaveta Epanchin and especially her idealistic youngest daughter Aglaya, with whom the prince later shares a short-lived engagement.

Myshkin establishes a narrative agency in this first part of the novel, constituted by such stories as the Epanchin family hear, by displaying an empathetic and compassionate imagination that rebels against the confining notions of identity and illness that have thus far defined him. He rebels with such genuine meekness and honesty that he irrevocably lures the Epanchin family as well as the reader into a reconsideration of his identity, as well as his philosophy that "compassion is the chief and perhaps the only law of being for mankind" (230). However, by the second part of the novel, with Myshkin's growing disillusionment at the hypocrisies and violence of St. Petersburg and Moscow society, his holy foolish identity begins collapsing and his narrative agency degrades to the point where he speaks in fragments and questions. He even acknowledges his own displacement within the novel, alienated from his identity as a holy fool and alienated further from those who surround him: "'Take it from me now as from a sick man… I'm superfluous in society… My gestures are inappropriate, I have no sense of measure; my words are wrong, they don't correspond to my thoughts, and that is humiliating for the thoughts… it is impossible not to laugh at me...sometimes... is that so?'" (342). From here on out the reader observes the novel's characters, along with the earlier dazzled Epanchin family, as

they begin pathologizing Myshkin as nothing more than a well-intentioned (but potentially dangerous) idiot. Hunt writes, “By the nineteenth century holy fools were treated as mentally ill, subjected to a scientific model of interpretation that viewed foolishness as a pathology” (4), and this reductive interpretation and pathologization of the holy fool renders Myshkin’s conscience incompatible with the narrowly conceived means of interpretation and narration in 19th century Russian society. Dostoevsky shows that the moral consequences of reductive and positivistic paradigms of interpretation, in which religious certainties had come under fire, the holy fool’s efficacy collapses.

Myshkin’s holy foolishness degrades to such a point that he appears led only by the agency of others, and toward the end of the novel Myshkin finds himself engaged to marry Nastasya Fillipovna out of a more disjointed effort to save her from herself that mirrors his earlier proposal to her. But because he no longer fulfills the identity of a holy fool, it is not out of divine forgiveness but out of misplaced human duty that he attempts to go through with it, despite his human desire for Aglaya. Joseph Frank, in his magisterial 6-volume literary biography of Dostoevsky, writes, “The strain of the Prince’s impossible position has finally caused him to lose all touch with reality. No longer able to distinguish between his vision of universal love and the necessary exclusions and limiting choices of life, he is presented as having passed altogether beyond the bounds of accepted social codes” (337). At this point in the novel one of the other characters seeks to have him declared insane and even committed, but the doctor that comes to examine Myshkin remarks, “if such people were to be put under restraint there would be no one left to keep an eye on them” (587). The unaffected voice of rationality and positivism, then, is not to be trusted.

The novel ends with a series of tragic events that leave the novel's main heroine, Nastasya Filippovna, murdered, Rogozhin (the murderer) mad with brain fever and sentenced to hard labor in Siberia, and Myshkin himself degraded into a state of unremitting idiocy. This apparent unredemptive ending appears to conflict with Dostoevsky's "positively beautiful man" goal, and yet, Myshkin, rather than a failure due to the novel's tragic end, confronts the reader with the limits of rationality as an adequate guide to human behavior and reveals the tensions between holy fool and idiot which reflect the larger conflicts between spiritual and secular Russia. Joan Magretta explores this in her essay "Radical Disunities: Mind and Madness in *Pierre* and *The Idio*t," asserting that the paradoxes of Myshkin's holy foolishness, epilepsy, and ethical efficacy "inverts the values" (243) of interpretation in order to challenge the positivistic trends in a Russian society that cannot understand the "unreason of sacrifice" (234) that undergird all his motives. The narrative thus engages the reader to resist the rationalization of human behavior as the only means by which to understand others. The novel's ending is another layer to the paradox of holy foolishness.

Murav also identifies this tension between Myshkin and narrator as a deliberate act to underscore society's reductive medicalized projection of Myshkin as a pathologized idiot. "The medical version," Murav states, "comes to dominate the narrator's commentary, especially at the end of the novel when Myshkin has ceased to be intelligible to him in any other terms" (87). The narrator, like society, fails to understand Myshkin, and thus diagnoses him in rational and acceptable terminology. To understand him from a religious framework would have asked the narrator and society to confront the tensions within society that remain unchallenged. "The narrator's abrupt abandonment of his hero opens up the possibility of other accounts of Prince

Myshkin's final actions, which require the reader's active role in the process of interpretation" (Murav 88). The reader's role, Murav asserts, crucially regards Dostoevsky's intention of highlighting the conflicting tensions that are responsible for pathologizing and condemning Myshkin as a failure.

During his preliminary work on the notebooks before beginning and during the work of the novel, Dostoevsky wrote a letter to his niece, stating "the idea of the novel is my old favourite one, but it is so difficult that for a long time I did not dare attempt it… I am terribly afraid it will be a positive failure" (Lowe 17). In the same letter he writes, "the main idea of the novel is to depict the positively good man. There is nothing more difficult than this in the world, especially nowadays… the task is immeasurable… there is only one positively good man in the world, and that is Christ." The fear of failure plagued Dostoevsky throughout the duration of his writing *The Idiot*, which was published serially, and he often ended one part without knowing precisely how to continue. Not to mention that the he was plagued by turmoil while writing including living with a suicidal addiction to gambling, the ever-present fear of a fatal epileptic attack, a constant pressure from debtors and the threat of debtor's prison, and the unspeakably tragic death of his infant daughter. Despite all this, Dostoevsky sought to create a "positively beautiful man" out of Myshkin, but he also ended the novel as consumed by the darkness of murder, madness, and idiocy. After finishing the novel, Dostoevsky wrote again to his niece that "almost the whole novel was thought out and written for the sake of the denouement" (Lowe 318), and whether or not this is Dostoevsky trying to defend his idea is up to the reader. These two seemingly irreconcilable sources, that is, Myshkin as "positively beautiful" and the intentional denouement of Nastasya's murder by Rogozhin, appear to the reader as rather

incongruous inspirations. But the novel's ending and Myshkin's final descent into idiocy function harmonically, as in his final self-abnegation Myshkin's idiocy reveals what Dostoevsky was attempting to portend. Myshkin's holy foolishness is by no means harmless and his sacrificial actions do not function well in a society concerned with materialism and power, but his final tragic end reveals the deep chasms in a spiritual landscape that Dostoevsky urged must be addressed and reevaluated. The holy foolishness that is at the center of Myshkin's identity is not the failure in this situation, it is only the failure of society to receive and interpret the holy fool's message.

Though it may appear so, Dostoevsky did not limit the possibilities of goodness to holy fools and idiots. This becomes clear with the depth of Myshkin's capability for sacrificial empathy and emotional intelligence that the novel displays. Instead, Dostoevsky shaped his narrative depiction of provocative goodness itself as a facet of holy foolishness that shocks (with scandal scenes) and leads (with scenes of luminous agency and faith) (often occuring at the same time) the reader to a space that actively demands a reconsideration of the ethos that dominates the spiritually impoverished landscape of Russian society; simultaneously confronting the reader with her own spiritual and moral inadequacies. Myshkin sought, in effect, to enact an almost eschatological abolition of suffering through radical love and unearthly forgiveness; and he positively failed. The climatic scene of the novel leaves us with the ineffectual paradox of a broken man, unable to bridge the divide between his own convictions and the egoisms of both Nastasya and Rogozhin. However, the feelings of unease and a desire for resolution that remains undelivered is meant to be significant. Robin Feuer Miller in her canonical work on *The Idiot* writes, "Dostoevsky allows the readers the dignity of making his (or her) own decision about

what has occurred" (223) and these feelings, Dostoevsky suggests by constructing complex and often contradictory narratives, are the "essence of religious feeling which doesn't fit in with any reasoning" (221). Myshkin's failure represents the anxiety of faith and the goodness he embodied remains unrealizable, but his aim still seeks to provoke a necessary and radical reinterpretation of values.

The novel ends with Lizaveta Epanchin, whom Joseph Frank calls "the character who has always been the closest in spirit to the Prince but has managed to keep her feet successfully on the ground" (339-340), "[weeping] with all her heart" after seeing Myshkin back in the Swiss asylum in "his sick and humiliated condition" because, "apparently everything was forgiven him" (612). Lizaveta's apparent forgiveness for Myshkin's treatment of her daughter Aglaya and his self-sacrificing actions for Nastasya, speaks to the fact that the imprint Myshkin's actions and words have left on the novel's characters is not easily forgotten. Lizaveta's openness and persistent sympathy with Myshkin suggests a refusal to simply dismiss what he stood for even in view of his grotesque failure. Perhaps another ass will bray and bring him back to us again.

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